

ELSAH HISTORY

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ELSAH AND THE GREAT RIVER ROAD

by Charles B. Hosmer, Jr.



The Elsay waterfront about 1910, courtesy of Edgar Hansell. In the foreground is Hansell's warehouse and then the Odd Fellows Hall. Today the entrance to the Great River Road runs across the site of the Hall.

Residents of Elsay who moved here after 1965 have good reason to believe that the Great River Road has always been part of the waterfront and that we have always been able to get to downtown Alton in less than fifteen minutes. But those who lived in Elsay before 1953 had a direct rail connection with both Alton and St. Louis. In May of that year a school bus converted to rail use made its final run, and the citizens of Elsay became completely dependent upon the automobile. The only ways to leave Elsay were on county roads that ran to Beltsrees, or to route 100 by way of Elsay cemetery or the main road that now passes the entrance to Joywood. Only the last road was fully paved. Did people believe that the River Road would soon extend to Elsay and Grafton in order to make up for the loss of the "Dinky"? Interviews with a number of long-term residents lead us to believe that a direct road connection with Alton in 1953 seemed to be something of a dream.

In order to understand the story of Elsay and the highway that passes across its waterfront, we consulted the clipping files at Principia College and a scrapbook kept

by Michael Barnal as a Cub Scout project in the early 1960's. We interviewed Cyrus A. Bunting, Edward Keller, Nancy McDow, Bob Lowder, Eleanor Barnal, and Bob and June Cronin. We made two discoveries right away: 1) The story of the development of the Great River Road is a long and complicated story that goes back at least to 1934, involving considerable work on the part of John McAdams of the *Alton Telegraph*. 2) Each Elsay resident had a very different personal reaction to the planning and construction of the highway; it is impossible to come up with a general consensus that could accurately describe the way in which natives of Elsay greeted the road on its completion. In fact we discovered quite a range of opinion on the effects of the road today.

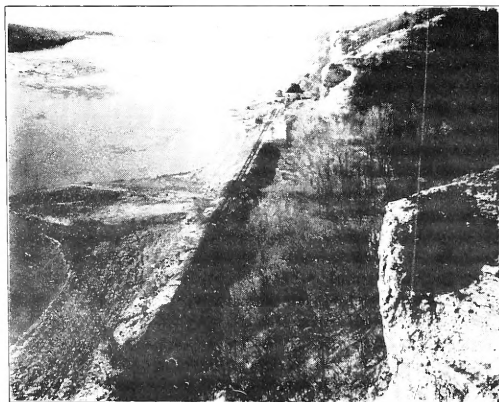
An interesting comparison can be drawn between the Gateway Arch and the Great River Road between Alton and Grafton. Each was the idea of a determined citizen; each involved a great deal of planning and political action; each was conceived in the depth of the Depression with actual construction not coming until almost the outbreak

of World War II; each came to completion in the middle 1960's. In the case of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial the key leader was a St. Louis lawyer named Luther Ely Smith. John McAdams, an Alton journalist, had led the movement to build the Lewis and Clark bridges; he also urged the creation of Pere Marquette State Park; and he was instrumental in getting a new city hall for Alton. In December of 1934 he chaired a meeting at the Mineral Springs Hotel in Alton that launched the plan for the section of highway that would link Alton with Grafton and the park. Like Luther Smith, John McAdams did not live to see his project completed; he was killed in an automobile accident in Florida in the winter of 1941.

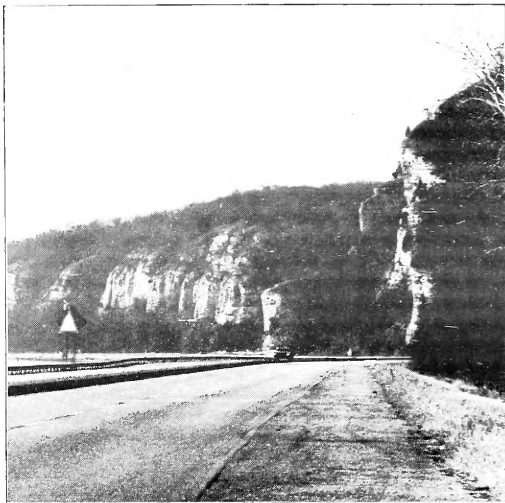
So, shortly after construction began, this portion of the Great River Road got its name: the McAdams Highway.

When the first WPA worker began to quarry rock and bring sand for the road in April of 1940, Elsah people seemed dimly aware of its significance for them. After all, the project was more than ten miles away, and the "Dinky" was going to run for twelve more years. Principia College moved its student body to Elsah in February of 1935, and Frederic Morgan considered the plan for a river road to be a blessing for the school, although he must have known it was only in the planning stage. Nancy McDow was more aware of the construction than most Elsah residents because she rode the railroad into Alton almost everyday to go to school. It was obvious to her that workers were moving rock from the Norman quarry to fill the shore of the new highway. Bob Lowder remembers that during World War II the first section of the road reached Stanka Lane, and there it stopped for nearly fifteen years.

The Army Engineers held a hearing in May of 1941 to find out if there were any objections to extending the new road from the Jersey County line to Elsah. The meeting ended in less than an hour because there were no objections. Certainly there was constant talk of completing the highway all the way to Grafton, but that possibility did not reach serious planning stage until the years immediately following the war. Elsah may have been aware that the City of Grafton was willing to cooperate fully with the decision to run the River Road through that community. This was in March of 1948, and there was no decision at that time whether or not to construct a new road along the river side of Grafton. There was a possibility of running the highway right through the middle of Grafton on a grade high enough to avoid most floods. The reporter who covered the event referred to the "united voice of the City of Grafton," which was willing to "cooperate fully."



The Elsah waterfront from Mount Vernon Bluff taken in the early 1930's. Courtesy of Principia.

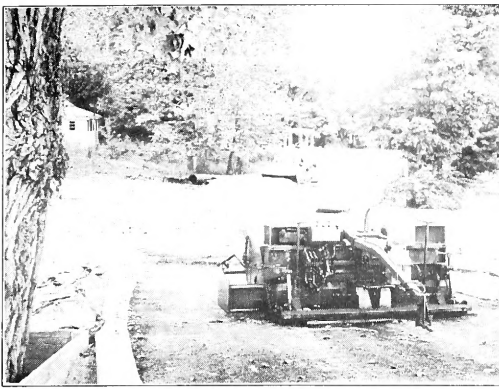


The Great River Road from Mount Vernon Bluff about 1968. Courtesy of Paul O. Williams.

Within the administration of Principia there were discussions of the probable impact of the Great River Road on the village of Elsah. As early as May of 1941 the college landscape architect Butler Sturtevant reported that it was essential for Elsah to consider zoning in order to prevent the commercialization of Mill Street. In November of 1954 a highway engineer with the Department of Commerce wrote to Cyrus A. Bunting, Principia's Director of Plant and Construction, that Elsah should consider zoning "to protect its quaint and distinctive charm." He believed that "this should be done as soon as possible in order to control possible speculative development which might be made in anticipation of the construction of the parkway. Competitive use of neon signs is particularly destructive to antebellum charm." Principia administrators were aware of a plan in the early 1950's to run the highway inland at Lockhaven and go up through Beltrees. Although they favored any location that would not invade the privacy of the campus, the college administration soon went along with the plan to run the road under the bluffs.

By the winter of 1957 it was obvious that a pair of bridges were under construction at Piasa Creek that would bring the McAdams Parkway up to Lockhaven and the Country Club. A large harbor was also under construction at that location. Some optimists predicted that the road would be complete to Grafton by 1960, but that proved to be an impossible goal. Principia had begun to plan an entrance road through Eminence Hollow in order to keep college traffic out of the village. Cyrus Bunting spent many hours working on this plan, but it proved to be too expensive because it required several turns on a very steep grade. In addition, Principia would have had to staff two entrance gates for security purposes. When the highway was built the state did include an entrance curb at Eminence Hollow, but after a few years it became necessary to remove the paving which had become an unwanted parking lot.

As contracts were let in 1960 to bring the parkway up past Elsah, the Principia *Pilot* described the village as a "boating" community. The college was in the process of finding a way to deed some land to the town for a boat landing next to Askew Creek. There was an ominous note in the article: "When the road is finished...Prin will lose some of the isolation we now enjoy, and Elsah may lose much of



Construction of the new entrance to Elsie, August 1974

its quaintness. The campus will require a greater degree of policing."

When the road was virtually complete to Elsie in the fall of 1963 another *Pilot* reporter said, "Mayor Hake remarked that approximately half of the residents of the area, including some members of the college community, are not in favor of opening the road if its termination point is Elsie. Because the road is a scenic route, it will attract a great amount of traffic, and if Elsie were its termination point, ninety percent of the cars would be using the roads of Elsie. Needless to say, these small lanes were not built to accommodate such traffic. The decision as to whether or not the road will open at Elsie will be decided by a vote of the residents in the near future." We have no record of such a vote, and the Great River Road did open into Elsie in the winter of 1964.

Bob Lowder was serving on the town board at the time. He was not impressed with the extravagant claims from the highway officials, "It sounded good at the time the way they talked it up." He went on to explain that the village officials were led to believe that the highway would have very limited access and that the proposed boat landing at Elsie would be kept clear of floating debris. That did not happen. The traffic that poured into the village was so great that Dewey McDow said to his daughter Nancy one day, "I can't get out of my own town!" By the fall of 1963 Nancy had started driving to work in Alton along the partially completed highway. There was a warning in the November 15, 1963, *Telegraph*, stating that the road was not officially open and therefore motorists were subject to arrest. Cy Bunting remembered some rather dangerous drag races that occurred before the highway was complete.

One headline in the *Pilot* stated: "McAdams Highway Introduces Elsie to the Twentieth Century." In our interviews with long-time residents we found several different views of that event. Nancy McDow heard rumors about the new elevation of the parkway that would make it impossible to see the river from the front of Elsie. Eleanor Barnal concluded the highway was a mixed blessing: "It supplied jobs for some, easier access to Alton and St. Louis." She went on to explain that it gave residents a way to drive out of the valley all year round, but Elsie's citizens could no longer gather at the riverfront to talk in the evening. The Cronins also missed the sense of community that came at sunset: "Elsie riverfront was kind of an official gathering place for families, and it was fun, and people would gather at the river in the evening, when the work was done, and visit... We also used to swim in the river. There were sand beaches."

Although some residents like Nancy McDow and Edward Keller had shopped in Alton for years, others like the Cronin family switched their allegiance from Jerseyville more toward Alton with the new highway. The Cronins moved their church affiliation from Belts to Grafton once it was possible to go in the winter without fear of the hills. A number of businesses closed in Elsie following 1965, including Keller's grocery store, Prather's grocery store, and the Village Inn. But it appears that none of those decisions were based on the shift in shopping habits that came with the River Road. Edward Keller believed that "the time had come about" to close the store anyway. He saw no connection between his decision to end a business that had lasted ninety years and the new highway. Ora Prather wanted to move to California. Cy Bunting said that Principia waited until Howard Center was open before closing the Village Inn. After the faculty dining room opened at the College in 1968 there was no longer need for a Principia-run restaurant in Elsie.

One of the most controversial aspects of the new highway was the original entrance, which came straight off of Mill Street with no curve. When motorists were at the stop sign they were at a grade that made it almost impossible to see cars approaching from the left, mainly because the bridge railing obscured the view. Cy Bunting became increasingly concerned about the situation, particularly after some children were killed at the intersection. He took pictures from a car at the Mill Street approach and compared them with pictures taken from the site of the present entrance, showing improved visibility. State officials were impressed with his slide presentation, along with some comments from the local police. The entrance has been changed. Edward Keller and Bob Lowder believed the original Mill Street entrance would have worked if the road had been raised high enough, to the level of the present Corner Nest, and there would have been less of a problem with floods with a new design.

When residents are asked to evaluate the Great River Road, we get a wide range of responses. Nancy McDow, as a commuter, said, "It was like somebody giving me a million dollars when it came, with driving back and forth to work." The Cronins believe that the increased attention brought by River Road traffic started people "thinking about preserving the old." Bob Lowder has a more negative view: "We did have a quiet village. Too much traffic. Sounded good at the time, the way they talked it up. But the way they talked it up and the way they did it was two different things."

Anyone who tries to photograph the riverfront of Elsie from the Missouri shore will notice how the highway creates a band of stone that cuts off the village from the river. When one looks at old photographs of the shore, it is clear that we are not a river town today because our town has a major scenic highway crossing the place where Elsie once had a distillery, a flour mill, a warehouse, and the Odd Fellows Hall. We can refer to Elsie as possessing a very well-preserved residential and business district. But one of our main assets is now covered with concrete, and it connects us with the outside world in a way that would amaze residents thirty years ago.



Irene M. Timmeriere, a friend of Elsah

The board of Historic Elsah Foundation was saddened to hear of the passing of Mrs. Irene Timmeriere in early January, just as she was about to come to one of our meetings. Because she was such a strong supporter of Elsah and the Foundation we believe our members should come to appreciate the career of this remarkable woman. Many will remember her as the hostess of our most recent Christmas party, sharing her collection of the works of Tasha Tudor. But that was only a small part of her wide range of interests.

Irene and her husband Maitland have worked for nearly half a century in support of their own church, the College Avenue Presbyterian, their community, Alton, and many historical organizations in Illinois and Missouri including Historic Elsah Foundation. While her husband served for 36 years on the Alton City Council, Irene helped develop Pride, the Madison County Historical Society and the Friends of the Lovejoy Library at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. She researched and published material on the history of the development of the Presbyterian ministry in Missouri and Illinois. In the light of these diverse activities it is really remarkable that she decided to accept the invitation to serve on the board of our Foundation.

When Irene Timmeriere agreed to help an organization it was certain that things would be done effectively, and she never loaned her "name" to a cause; she put her heart and soul into whatever project came along. On our board she was always willing to put us into contact with individuals who could help us with historical or building projects. She was a source of ideas for fund raising and for public events. And we always knew that we were dealing with an individual that was doing the same thing for many other organizations.

Irene and Maitland worked so hard for their favorite causes that we never realized they had retired from their regular jobs. They both developed a great interest in antiques and history from the Steinmetz family in Horsham, Pennsylvania. The Timmerieres visited these friends quite often and began a thorough study of local history, art, and antiques. They bought and read books, attended sales, got to know dealers, and began a remarkable collection of Americana. In recent years Irene was able to price books for the annual book sale at the Lovejoy Library, and at the same time help her church and other groups in pricing objects for their sales. She completed the program for a 1991 celebration of the sesquicentennial of the Presbyterian faith in our area.

We were fortunate in Elsah to have a friend who was unselfish in her devotion to all the causes she chose to serve. Irene was an idea person, an individual who realized that the brick streets of Alton needed preservation and also that a bikeathon on the River Road could support the work of Pride. She attended meetings night after night, mailed hundreds of letters, and made long distance telephone calls all at her own expense. She budgeted her time carefully and expended her energies productively.

The board of Historic Elsah Foundation will always be grateful that a very busy citizen of Alton found time to help us in our deliberations. We are proud and grateful to have served with Irene Timmeriere.



A Historic Elsah Foundation Christmas party with Irene Timmeriere serving punch. On the left is Shirley Vogt and on the right Inge Mack. Courtesy of Inge Mack

HISTORIC ELSAH FOUNDATION

INCOME STATEMENT

January-December 1990

	Income	Disbursements
Memberships	\$2,582.50	
Donations	83.87	
Sales	1,379.98	
Rents	14,825.00	
Interest	841.74	
HEF office expense		2,005.98
Preservation of		
Village Hall		1,680.00
Village Hall expenses		269.45
Mott Commercial Building		
Preservation/maintenance		16,814.94
Insurance & Taxes		3,409.08
Publications		652.28
Museum expenses		1,352.77
Special events		176.06
Donations/gifts		294.95
TOTAL	\$19,713.09	\$26,655.51
Net Loss for 1990	6,942.42	

Restoration and maintenance for
Mott Commercial Building
(Elsah Landing Restaurant)
1988-1990 \$25,609.23

Insurance and Taxes
1988-1990 10,833.10

Total expenditure for
Mott Commercial Building
1988-1990 \$36,442.33